Student-Parent Data: What We Know, What We Don't, and How to Find Out

Alyssa Stefanese Yates

About the Student-Parent White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education. An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. This paper and its companion piece, prepared under the direction of Lindsey P. Myers and Elizabeth Howard, seek to identify areas of interest in research and policy regarding student-parents in postsecondary education. Imaginable Futures served as a partner in this work with ACE and the Carnegie Foundation. We also appreciate Theresa Anderson's constructive feedback on this paper.

ACE ® American Council on Education ®

Introduction

The most recent National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data estimates that there are over 3.1 million undergraduate student-parents enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States (ACE 2023). Student-parents, also called parenting students, are individuals who are enrolled in an educational degree or certificate program and who have at least one child or dependent. Although this current figure is significant and conveys that nearly one in five undergraduate students are parenting while pursuing higher education, NPSAS and other commonly relied on national data sources as well as institution-level data collection likely do not capture all the students caring for children or dependents in classrooms and campuses across the country. Without an accurate representation and understanding of the undergraduate student-parent population, stakeholders (e.g., institutional leadership, faculty, staff, and policymakers) are unable to design and implement the necessary supports for student-parent success (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). Thorough data collection is necessary to better understand student-parents' experiences pursuing higher education, their academic progress, their educational outcomes (e.g., retention and graduation rates), and their utilization of campus support services to better support their success through federal or national, state, and institutional policies and practices.

Furthermore, collecting and using such data to describe and analyze institutional activities and inform policy will elevate student-parents as a population that needs additional support and help to shift institutional goals and priorities. This brief focuses on the important role data can play in developing policies and practices to support student-parents' persistence and degree acquisition, which will better position student-parents and their children for long-term upward social and economic mobility and ultimately incentivize institutional transformation to drive equity and social and economic mobility. It begins with an overview of what higher education generally knows about the student-parent population, such as student-parent demographics, educational outcomes, shared challenges, and opportunities for success that promote intergenerational mobility. Then it explains how data is currently collected on this student population at the national, state, and institutional levels followed by an evaluation of and commentary on these sources and data collection approaches. It emphasizes both best practices in data collection and the drawbacks and subsequent gaps in higher education's knowledge of parenting students. The brief concludes with recommendations for improved data collection at every level and how that may inform research, policy, and practice to support the social and economic mobility of student-parents.

What We Know: Overview of Knowledge of and Data on Student-Parents

Eighteen percent of the current undergraduate student population are student-parents. Of that 18 percent, 88 percent are adult learners (or students who are 25 years of age or older); nearly three-quarters are women (74 percent); and over half are people of color (55 percent) (ACE 2023). Despite comprising a substantial percentage of the contemporary college-going population, student-parents have been historically overlooked and underserved by higher education institutions and policymakers. A general lack of awareness of and support for student-parents—due in part to poor data collection or documented knowledge on student-parents—contributes to their low persistence and degree acquisition rate compared to that of their nonparenting peers (Short et al. 2022; Cruse et al. 2019; Jez 2023); specifically, only 18 percent of student-parents received a bachelor's or associate degree within six years of study compared to 27 percent of independent and 54 percent of dependent or traditionally aged, nonparenting students (Cruse et al. 2021). Despite their lower graduation or degree completion rates, student-parents typically earn similar or better grades than their nonparenting peers (DeMario 2021). There is an apparent disconnect between student-parents' capabilities and persistence, with over half of student-parents who enter higher education exiting without a credential (GAO 2019)—typically leaving them and their families in worse financial circumstances than when they started. Specifically, student-parents who are unable to complete

their degree are not only unlikely to access better or higher paying jobs associated with postsecondary education but also typically carry student loan debt (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). Researchers have shown that completing a college degree results in three times higher lifetime earnings gains for student-mothers than just enrolling—a gain of $8,900 per year compared with $2,700 on average in 2024 dollars (Anderson 2022).

Student-parents often pursue higher education to access better paying careers and position themselves to more easily provide for their and their children's basic needs (e.g., food and housing). NPSAS data from 2020 underscored student-parents' basic needs insecurity, showing that 31 percent of student-parents lived at or below the poverty line; 30 percent received food stamp benefits; 30 percent received women, infant, and children (WIC) benefits; and 7 percent had been recently homeless in 2020. Trellis Strategies found that 60 percent of student-parents surveyed were housing insecure compared with 47 percent of their nonparenting peers (Cornett 2023). Student-parents' financial hardships are exacerbated by greater higher education costs or expenses than their nonparenting peers (Cornett 2023; Williams et al. 2022; Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). Student-parents' complete cost of attendance inclusive of tuition and fees, housing, food, books, transportation, and childcare (Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022) ranges from two to five times more than the cost of attendance for low-income students without children (Williams et al. 2022). According to a recent study by EdTrust (Montague, Waller, and Williams 2022), student-parents would need to work an average of 52 hours per week to cover tuition costs and fees and childcare to attend a public institution—and 65 percent of undergraduate student-parents are enrolled in public institutions (ACE 2023). The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that U.S. families pay approximately $10,000 per year for infant, toddler, or four-year-old childcare, which is a significant financial barrier to student-parents' college enrollment and completion (Cruse et al. 2021).

Nearly 60 percent of student-parents work full time while pursuing higher education (ACE 2023) out of financial necessity; however, working beyond 20 hours per week can extend students' time to degree, causing them to ultimately spend more time in and money on higher education (Davis 2023). Consequently, parenting students are more likely to rely on student loans to fund their education and to carry institutional debt than other student populations (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023). Student-parents also struggle with loan repayment and more often miss a monthly payment, utilize forbearance, and default on their loans (Dundar, Tighe, and Turner 2023) than students without dependents—circumstances that are made worse for student-parents who are unable to finish their degree program and, subsequently, unable to tap into the financial and professional benefits of a higher education credential.

Supporting student-parents' success and degree completion not only benefits individual students but also has far-reaching or ripple effects on society and future generations, particularly their children's educational opportunities and attainment (Anderson 2020; Camardelle and Lee 2019). Both parents' educational attainment and socioeconomic status, which typically benefits from a college degree or credential, are positive predictors of children's future educational outcomes or achievement (Dubow, Boxer, and Huesmann 2009); specifically, children of parents with a college degree across socioeconomic statuses are more likely to earn college degrees themselves. Monaghan found, "Maternal bachelor's completion appears to increase high school completion by 4.5 percentage points, college enrollment by 8.5 percentage points, and bachelor's attainment by 6 percentage points" (Monaghan 2017, 15). Parents' educational attainment is also associated with greater future earnings, workforce participation, tax contributions, and overall financial security for both them and future generations (Ajayi et al. 2022; Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). College degree holders have on average greater lifetime earnings and annual incomes than high school graduates (APLU, n.d.; Gault, Milli, and Cruse 2018); for example, single mothers with associate degrees earned approximately $153,000 more in their lifetimes than single mothers who are high school graduates, and single mothers with bachelor degrees earned $296,000 more in their lifetimes than single mothers who are high school graduates (Gault, Milli, and Cruse 2018).Student-parents' degree completion also decreases their odds of needing to tap into or rely on social assistance programs (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) to meet their and their children's basic needs (Karp, Osche, and Smith 2016; APLU, n.d.).

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) found that single student-mothers who completed their associate or bachelor's degree were approximately 32 percent less likely to live in poverty and "saves society roughly $1,838 in public benefits spending for herself and her family over a four-year period, compared with those without college degrees" (Gault, Milli, and Cruse 2018, 5). These intergenerational social and economic benefits—which seem to remain consistent for students who earn a degree either before or after having children (Anderson 2022; Monaghan 2017)—emphasize the importance of supporting student-parents' academic progress and completion; however, as we discuss later in this piece, developing comprehensive federal, state-level, and institutional supports for student-parents is reliant on a data-informed understanding of student-parents' presence and needs.

Current Approaches to and State of Data Collection on Student-Parents

Student-parent researchers and advocates—such as representatives from Ascend at the Aspen Institute, Generation Hope, IWPR, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), Imaginable Futures, Lumina Foundation, New America, Urban Institute, EdTrust, and others—describe an overall dearth or lack of complete data on student-parents across the U.S. as well as on individual college and university campuses (Mait 2023; Anderson and Green 2022; Sick et al. 2023; Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023; Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023; Jez 2023). No one federal or nationwide data collection system captures all student-parents, particularly failing to represent or count student-parents who may not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)—a challenge for many first-generation, low-income, and other traditionally underrepresented student populations of which many student-parents belong (Cruse et al. 2019). Federal data sources also fail to provide a holistic picture of student-parents' conflicting responsibilities, financial constraints, and experiences. States, public higher education systems, and colleges and universities also struggle to identify and systematically gather information on student-parents, which is necessary for decision-making and resource allocation. This lack of representative federal data also prevents this population from being explicitly included in important national conversations around higher education and major applications of that data, such as the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education's® new Social and Economic Mobility Classification.[1]

National Data Sources and Approaches to Student-Parent Data Collection

For federal sources or nationwide data on student-parents, organizations, scholars, and institutions are generally limited to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Census Bureau, and U.S. Department of Labor surveys focused on either educational enrollment status or parental status, such as the Current Population Survey, Survey of Income and Program Participation, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and to some extent,

---

1   The Carnegie Classification® is the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. In 2022, ACE and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching partnered to design the Social and Economic Mobility Classification, which complements the existing classification structure that prioritizes research. Although meaningful change is underway at many U.S. institutions of higher learning that prioritize other components of students' educational experience, the current Carnegie Classifications lack mechanisms for measuring much of this activity. While research is a critical endeavor, with a redesign and optimization, the Carnegie Classifications can measure, recognize, and incentivize institutional achievements across numerous other dimensions critical to the success of students, particularly low-income students, first-generation students, students of color, and student-parents—who have historically experienced disparate access to and outcomes from higher education when compared with their White and higher income peers. By reimagining the Carnegie Classifications, ACE and the Carnegie Foundation envision an opportunity to incentivize institutional transformation to drive racial equity and social and economic mobility. ACE and the Carnegie Foundation seek to establish new norms that influence institutions to think more broadly, measure themselves across a greater number of dimensions, and transform their operations to achieve excellence in a variety of domains. Increasing social and economic mobility for learners—especially with an eye for addressing disparities experienced by undersupported populations, including student-parents— is paramount among these priorities. With expansion of what the Carnegie Classifications measure to include social and economic mobility data, the classifications can become an effective tool for incentivizing institutions to adopt different approaches to drive these outcomes across diverse populations of learners.

the Current Population Survey (Sick et al. 2023; Mait 2023; Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023). NCES sources, namely the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS), and Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) gather information on students' dependency status (i.e., whether they have a dependent or child, the number of dependents, and the age of their youngest child) and the amount of their monthly childcare expenses (Sick et al. 2023; Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). BPS also provides insight into student-parents' completion rates, and B&B provides longitudinal data on student-parent graduates from four-year institutions (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). The previous iteration of the FAFSA form also collected information on applicants' number of dependents and marital status (Sick et al. 2023); however, the 2024–25 FAFSA no longer collects information on dependents. As we discuss later in this piece, no single federal data source provides a complete picture of undergraduate student-parents—making it difficult for administrators and legislators to find, access, and utilize easily digestible or understandable data on student-parents.

State-Level Data Sources or Approaches to Student-Parent Data Collection

States primarily approach student-parent data collection through policy, namely legislation and governmental mandates. For example, Michigan, Oregon, Illinois, and Texas passed legislation that requires colleges to report students' parental status to the state coordinating body or legislature (Mait 2023; Sick et al. 2023; Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023). Similarly, California and other states are actively pursuing a legislative approach to better supporting and serving student-parents.

MICHIGAN

Michigan utilized educational appropriations (**Senate Bill 0927,** Section 275i) to require public institutions to dedicate a portion of their state appropriations or funding to collect demographic information on students with dependents to better support student-parent credential completion and raise statewide completion rates (Sick et al. 2023). However, colleges were not required to collect any new data, and the request was repealed the following year.

OREGON

Oregon Senate Bill (SB) 564 requires the state's Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) to create and work with Oregon's public colleges and universities to implement a question in regularly administered student demographic forms to assess students' parental status; however, institutions are exempt from changing current student information collection forms to accommodate this mandate—making it unclear when institutions must begin to implement or include this question. HECC is responsible for holding institutions accountable for student-parent data collection and reporting.

ILLINOIS

Illinois's SB0267, the Student Parent Data Collection Act, encompasses similar aspects to both Michigan and Oregon's respective bills; specifically, SB0267 requires state public institutions to collect and report institutional data on student-parents and available resources, such as on-campus childcare (SB0267). The bill also holds the state's Board of Higher Education responsible for writing a data collection question for public colleges and universities to use to identify the number of enrolled students with dependent children (Sick et al. 2023). This bill uniquely requires institutions to report the number of student-parents utilizing on-campus childcare each semester and publish the number of student-parents enrolled in each college or university (SB0267).

TEXAS

In June 2023, Texas passed **HB 1361**, **SB 459**, and **SB 412**—bills focused on supporting pregnant and parenting students. HB 1361 requires public higher education institutions to document or keep track of student-parent

enrollment and collect academic and demographic information on the student-parent population (Texas Legislature Online 2023). While this brief is most interested in the data collection component, HB 1361 also requires institutions to designate an employee to serve as a liaison or point person for student-parents. This liaison is required to share information on institutional resources, public or social assistance programs and services, parenting and childcare information, employment and transportation assistance, and academic support services (Texas Legislature Online 2023). Utilizing institution-specific information on student-parents, SB 459 requires that institutions provide student-parents with priority or early course registration (Young Invincibles 2023).

CALIFORNIA

California passed several data-related legislative measures in hopes of better serving student-parents, such as the Cradle-to-Career Data System (C2C), a broad student data collection system. C2C is intended to include and report information related to parenting students (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023). Additionally, California's **Assembly Bill (AB) 2881** requires all California higher education institutions to provide student-parents with priority course registration and information on student services and resources (Frawley 2022). Although this bill does not require institutional data collection on student-parents, such initiatives are necessary to fulfill the mandate and provide parenting students with early registration and other necessary institutional support (Frawley 2022). California also has proposed legislation focused on student-parents, namely Assembly Bill (AB 2458) or Greater Accessibility, Information, Notice, and Support (GAINS) for Student Parents. If passed, this bill would mandate institutions to collect and report data on student-parents that can be collected from relevant professionals on campus (e.g., financial aid officers) (**AB 2458**) in addition to required adjustments to financial aid to better account for student-parents' childcare expenses (EdTrust-West, n.d.)—hopefully mitigating institutional challenges with implementing AB 2881, which requires priority registration for student-parents and childcare cost barriers, which is often a top challenge to persistence and degree completion.

Institutional Data Sources and Approaches to Student-Parent Data Collection

For institutional student-level data, most higher education institutions rely on FAFSA data rather than institutional mechanisms to track their student-parent enrollment and academic progress (Mait 2023; Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). FAFSA data provides an unreliable measure of student-parent enrollment because it only captures 70 percent of all students and 75 percent among students with dependents (NCES 2020), namely students who complete the application and are eligible for federal financial aid (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023; Mait 2023; Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). Student-parents seem to follow this pattern; for example, nearly a third of student-parents in the California community college system never applied for financial aid during their first year of enrollment (Reed et al. 2021). FAFSA also does not fully account for student-parents' childcare and other parental expenses in calculating students' financial aid (Miller 2023)—leaving the inclusion of these expenses in aid calculations or packages to the discretion of financial aid administrators who might be unaware of or ill-informed on student-parents. Unfortunately, the 2024–25 FAFSA no longer collects relevant information on students' dependents. Additionally, institutions typically gather student demographic information at the time of enrollment; however, students' parental status may change throughout their enrollment and would not be reflected in college applications and initial enrollment forms (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023).

Institutions also regularly rely on student-parents to self-identify, seek out support services, and advocate for their own needs (Sick et al. 2023); for example, student-parents are encouraged to self-identify with their institution's financial aid office in order to ensure their financial aid package accounted for "dependent care expenses" and that they were considered for possible institutional scholarships for parenting students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Yet, student-parents often feel unwelcome and uncomfortable publicly identifying as parents on campus (Ascend at The Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation 2021; Field 2022), leaving institutional faculty, staff, and administrators with a false impression of the size and need of the student-parent population on their respective campuses.

A handful of institutions are leading the way in implementing data collection systems to identify and better serve parenting students. Such exemplars include Monroe Community College (MCC), a State University of New York (SUNY) institution that is frequently noted for integrating questions related to students' parental status into their registration process (Sick et al. 2023; DeMario 2021; Mait 2023). By effectively documenting parenting student enrollment and use of campus resources (e.g., on-campus childcare), MCC was able to calculate student-parents' persistence rate and the impact of support services on their degree completion (Sick et al. 2023)—a crucial factor in institutional resource allocation. MCC also used data to receive grant funding to support its campus childcare center through the U.S. Department of Education's Child Care Access Means Parents in School program (Mait 2023). MCC's ability to identify and track their student-parent enrollment over a period of 10 years provided staff with more accurate metrics that they could use to advocate for and access additional funding that directly supported student-parents and positioned them for success, highlighting the benefits and possible uses of systematic data collection.

Other institutions, such as Oregon State University and The Technical College Systems of Georgia, are noted for including voluntary questions related to parental status in their student registration and enrollment surveys to improve outreach to student-parents and increase their awareness of relevant campus resources (Sick et al. 2023). These institutions utilized data to develop action plans, update institutional protocols, and create student support services designed for student-parents (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). Washington State's Board of Community and Technical Colleges also utilizes student registration forms to gather information on students' parenting and marital status (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019).

The World Education's National College Transition Network highlighted eight additional community colleges—Broward College, Columbus State Community College, Delaware County Community College, Frederick Community College, Kingsborough Community College, Lee College, Western Technical College, and University of Hawaii Windward Community College—that "engaged in comprehensive data collection to establish a baseline understanding of the number and experiences of parenting students" (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). These institutions developed innovative approaches to student-parent data collection, such as integrating a pop-up question on parenting status into the institution's learning management system (Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023).

Urban Institute's Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students also facilitates a college community of practice composed of nine public institutions across California, Illinois, and Oregon committed to implementing or enhancing comprehensive data collection on student-parents, particularly focused on student-mothers (Urban Institute, n.d.). Participating California institutions include both four-year institutions from the California State University (CSU) system and community, technical, or junior colleges: Bakersfield College, San Diego Mesa College, California Polytechnic State University–San Luis Obispo, and CSU Channel Islands. The City Colleges of Chicago system is a participant along with Harry S. Truman College and Kennedy-King College. Participating Oregon colleges include Klamath Community College, Lane Community College, Rogue Community College, Southwestern Oregon Community College, and Treasure Valley Community College.

Data is necessary to provide justification or rationale for dedicating institutions' limited financial and human resources to aid student-parents. In other words, institutional data is foundational in the development of institutional policies and practices; therefore, a lack of data on student-parents perpetuates this growing student population's invisibility and limits vital institutional support. The effects of poor or limited data on and lack of institutional attention to student-parents can have long lasting consequences, particularly as higher education institutions begin to utilize artificial intelligence (AI). AI inherently relies on existing data, and providing incomplete data will make AI ineffective in serving student-parents. Although this gap in data or institutional knowledge of student-parents has not been central to early discussions of AI, it follows that if colleges and universities are utilizing incomplete data to inform their AI, student-parents—as well as other populations underrepresented and undercounted at colleges—will continue to be misunderstood, overlooked, or poorly served.

What We Don't Know: Gaps in Data on Student-Parents

Our current data collection mechanisms or approaches to collecting information on student-parents are insufficient—leaving out portions of the student-parent population and crucial aspects of student-parents' demographics, evidence of effective practices and programs in supporting student-parents (Sattelmeyer and Obatuase 2023), and student-parents' overall experiences in and navigation of higher education. Without this foundational knowledge of student-parents' demographic characteristics, educational experiences, and student outcomes (e.g., retention and degree acquisition rates) (Doorley, Elakbawy, and Dundar 2023), student-parents will remain largely invisible and underserved in the higher education system.

Data Source Drawbacks, Constraints, and Challenges

NATIONAL DATA SOURCES

Overall, national student databases provide incomplete information on student-parents. Although NCES sources commonly relied on for insights on student-parents (e.g., NPSAS, BPS, and B&B) provide a national perspective on student-parents' demographics (e.g., racial identity and ethnicity, gender, age, poverty status), they do not account for or capture all student-parents pursuing educational credentials across the U.S. (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). These sources also do not include enough student-parent-focused or relevant questions to provide a holistic understanding of this student population. Information drawn from NCES may also be considered outdated or antiquated because it reflects figures from previous rather than current years and is fielded or conducted periodically on multi-year cycles; for instance, NPSAS data is shared every four years, which necessitates stakeholders utilizing the same data for an extended period. The 2020 NPSAS data was also delayed and interrupted by COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns. This likely slowed student-parent focused research, advocacy, and policy work and made the statistics less reliable than previous waves.

The Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), which is the most comprehensive federal data source on U.S. higher education (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019) and collects information from all Title IV or federal student aid-receiving postsecondary education institutions, does not collect any information on student-parents—a glaring gap in national data and, consequently, higher education's knowledge of student-parents.

STATE-LEVEL DATA SOURCES AND APPROACHES

Although more and more states are moving toward implementing legislation that requires state higher education systems and/or public institutions to regularly collect information on student-parent enrollment, academic progress, and participation in or utilization of campus resources, these bills have minimal accountability mechanisms. States—and often their higher education governing body or higher education system—have limited means for holding institutions accountable for adhering to their state's data collection requirements. For example, California's AB 2881 mandated that institutions provide student-parents with priority registration status; however, not all institutions have adhered to the deadline. Some institutions do not have accurate accounting of student-parents and therefore cannot determine which students qualify.

INSTITUTIONAL DATA SOURCES AND APPROACHES

Many institutions do not collect information on students' parental status, instead they previously relied on FAFSA data or other external data sources. FAFSA will no longer be a viable option for student-parent information, as the form is not collecting dependent information. The primary previous problem with FAFSA data was it inherently only gathered and shared information on students who completed and submitted the form. Many students either

elected to or were unable to complete the form, particularly first-generation and low-income students who often struggled to complete the form (Jaschik 2021). Therefore, it is likely that there are more student-parents—many of whom are first-generation and low-income students—who did not fill out the FAFSA and are, consequently, not included in the data, leaving institutions unaware of the full extent of student-parents' presence.

Although previous FAFSA data could be aggregated or broken down by institutions to provide a general sense of each institution's student-parent population, some institutions are unaware that they can utilize FAFSA in this way (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). Comparatively, institutions that are aware of this usage may be hesitant to utilize institution-level FAFSA data to gain a better sense of student-parents out of an abundance of caution for students' privacy and fear of accidentally identifying students and violating the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019). In comparison, data provided by other external sources—namely NCES—is typically general and at the state or regional level rather than student-level at the institution. Subsequently, these data cannot help build institutional leadership's knowledge of student-parents enrolled at their respective institutions.

In addition to reliance on external data sources, institutions commonly expect student-parents to self-identify (i.e., share with faculty and staff that they are a parent or have a child) and to advocate for their needs and access relevant information and resources; however, student-parents are commonly reluctant to identify as a parent out of concern that faculty, staff, and fellow students may treat them differently. Subsequently, student-parents often do not receive information on available support services and resources, such as on-campus childcare, because institutional actors are unaware of their parenting status. Student-parents may also receive inaccurate financial aid information; for example, student-parents may inadvertently file the FAFSA as a dependent student and have their financial aid eligibility impacted by their own parents, which is typical of traditionally aged undergraduate students. However, student-parents may qualify as an independent student based on their parental status and the level of financial support they provide their child or children. Overall, relying on students to disclose that they are a parent may lead to their receiving general student information rather than information reflective of their unique circumstances, which can have negative implications on their knowledge of and access to vital institutional, state, and federal resources and programs.

Institutions that try to integrate data collection on students' parental status in admission applications or enrollment forms may also inadvertently miss or overlook some student-parents because students' parental status may change over the course of their enrollment or time at the institution. Student-parents may also be hesitant to voluntarily answer questions that inquire about their parental or caregiver status and to some extent their marital status (Sick and Anderson 2024). Particularly, pregnant and parenting student-mothers may worry about formally confirming their parental and marital statuses in states with conservative policies around abortion access and rights (Doorley 2024).

How We Find Out: Recommendations for Student-Parent Data Collection

Systematic data collection on student-parents is crucial to build awareness and foreground the need for more funding and support services for this student population. Quantitative measurements or metrics are highly valued by decision-makers, namely institutional leadership and legislators, making data collection and assessment a vital component in accessing resources and building institutionalized support for student-parents. The conduit or means to accessing thorough metrics to present a holistic picture of student-parents' experiences and needs in higher education involves integration of student-parent data collection into previously established data collection tools and processes at all levels—national, state, and institutional.

Recommendations for Federal or National Data Collection

One of the most glaring gaps in national data sources' attention to student-parents is the lack of student-parent–centered questions (i.e., no question on parental status) in IPEDS. Urban Institute, IWPR, and others have recommended that the federal government integrate students' parental or caregiving status into established data collection systems starting with IPEDS. In addition to its wide usage across the higher education sector, the IPEDS system collects data on the very information needed to fill gaps in our understanding of the student-parent population, addressing drawbacks of other data sources.

For example, IPEDS collects student persistence and success through three measures: first-year retention rates, graduation rates, and educational outcomes (i.e., number of degrees and certificates completed) for students broken down by student enrollment status (e.g., full time and part time) and first time versus not first time enrolled students (NCES, n.d.)—a level of detail that can provide insight into when non-completing student-parents exit higher education. These data are documented at the six-year and eight-year marks since a cohort or class started at their respective institutions. Because student-parents are often part-time students, they may exit and reenter or reenroll in higher education at varying points and may take longer to complete than their nonparenting peers, making these markers especially relevant.

Utilizing these metrics, IPEDS would be more likely to capture or reflect accurate information on student-parents than other data collection approaches and have the potential to provide necessary insight into the population. IPEDS also collects information from all Title IV institutions—totaling over 7,500 institutions (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019)—rather than the representative sample provided by other NCES surveys. Utilizing IPEDS in this way would provide an unprecedented level and amount of comprehensive data on student-parents.

Furthermore, IPEDS data is collected three times each year, which would also correct for the quick antiquation of data from other national sources. There is some legislative movement or support for collecting parenting and caregiving status through IPEDS; specifically, **H.R. 6309**—Understanding Student Parent Outcomes Act of 2023—was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Deborah Ross and includes collecting parenting and caregiving student enrollment, employment status while in school, utilization of campus childcare, marital status, and degree completion. Currently, Urban Institute's Data-to-Action Campaign is working on informing an IPEDS data collection approach. IWPR (Gault, Cruse, and Schumacher 2019) also recommends higher education researchers capitalize on underutilized national data collection sources, such as the American Time Use Surveys, to gain different perspectives on student-parents even if these resources are not explicitly focused on or designed around higher education.

Recommendations for State-Level Data Collection

The integration of student-parent status questions into IPEDS would also benefit states by filling the gap or lack of state-specific data on student-parents. In other words, IPEDS data can be disaggregated by state as compared to NCES survey data, which only provides nationwide data. Additionally, Urban Institute and others have commented on the possible benefits of legislation requiring institutions to collect student-parent data (Sick et al. 2023); however, these legislative initiatives lack additional funding to support higher education institutions' and systems' data collection creation or implementation.

To make these legislative initiatives or well-intended mandates in support of student-parents more realistic and impactful, state governments need to invest in their public higher education institutions. Some legislation also seems to have ambiguous or undefined means for holding institutions accountable or responsible for adhering to state policy around student-parent data collection. While it is beneficial that these policies often suggest collaboration between higher education systems, governing bodies, and higher education institutions and provide institutions with some level of discretion in data collection processes, the policy language seems to offer little

structure or guidance for institutional implementation and suggests state systems have little oversight power to ensure improvement in statewide student-parent data collection.

Requiring some level of reporting and information-sharing on student-parents with state higher education commissions or agencies is a viable accountability tool. Legislative policy sets the stage for widespread student-parent data, signals and communicates a commitment to supporting student-parents, and encourages institutions to follow suit, but its effectiveness could be enhanced, particularly by holding institutions accountable for following these policies. To truly support student-parent success, states need to invest or dedicate more financial resources to position institutions to better serve student-parents, starting with establishing reliable data on and a better understanding of this student population.

Recommendations for Institutional Data Collection

Rather than relying on incomplete FAFSA data, institutions should build their own data collection approaches and leverage or utilize institutional research, admissions, financial aid, and other offices and divisions to integrate these institution-specific data collection methods. Institutionally grown data collection will provide more accurate, updated information on student-parents.

Specifically, institutions should begin by including a question or questions on students' parental and caregiving status along with their marital, relationship, or co-parenting status into enrollment forms, orientation registration or sign-up, and other previously established student information gathering tools. Urban Institute provides suggested language and data collection implementation approaches for institutions in their brief *How Should Colleges Collect Parenting Student Data* (Sick and Anderson 2024). Institutions should not only ask these questions as students enter the institution but also on a regular basis, because students' parental and relationship status can change over the course of their time or tenure at the institution. In other words, we recommend that institutions develop and implement data collection questions designed to capture the most up-to-date snapshot of or information on their student-parent population into the enrollment process for incoming students and quarterly or semi-annual course registration processes for current and returning students. We recommend institutions utilize the growing body of resources available to support their initial student-parent data collection, such as Urban Institute's Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students (Urban Institute, n.d.), which provides suggested language and questions that institutions may draw from and implement.

Rather than placing the onus on students to publicly identify and to some extent know which resources or programs to seek out, institutions should rely on their student information systems and tracking processes in order to know who their student-parents are and ensure they receive relevant and accurate information, such as information on on-campus childcare centers, student-parent study spaces or lounges, family friendly campus events, social service programs, etc. By collecting parental status information, institutions can create an automated communication system or listserv to more effectively provide these students with vital information, including scholarships they may be eligible for and general support services.

Institutions would also be able to utilize this information to inform faculty and staff who interact with student-parents so they may better serve and support them without making students explain their personal circumstances or parental status several times; for example, institutions could include or flag student-parents in their early-alert system and/or other advising systems. This data is critical for institutions to be better prepared and able to prioritize student-parents' holistic needs and create data-informed student support services (Ishimwe and Love 2023; Generation Hope 2023; Goodman, Osche, and Hatch 2023). Institution-level data collection can also be shared to more accurately inform state- and federal-level policy creation in support of student-parents.

References

ACE (American Council on Education). 2023. "Student-Parents in the U.S. Higher Education System." Infographic. Washington, DC: ACE. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Student-Parent-Infographic.pdf.

Ajayi, Kobi V., Gloria Odonkor, Sonya Panjwani, Oluwafemi Aremu, Whitney Garney, and Lisako E. McKyer. 2022. "Socio-ecological Barriers to Student-Parents Academic Success: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 46 (9): 1257–1274. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2065629.

Anderson, Theresa. 2020. "What If Mom Went Back to School? A Mixed Methods Study of Effects and Experiences for Both Generations When Mothers Return to School." PhD diss., The George Washington University.

Anderson, Theresa. 2022. *What If Mom Went Back to School? Short- and Long-Term Effects for Both Generations, With Policy and Practice Implications.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-if-mom-went-back-school.

Anderson, Theresa, and Autumn R. Green. 2022. *Roadmap for Change to Support Pregnant and Parenting Students: Putting Student-Parent Families at the Center of Recommendations for Practice, Policy, Research, and Investment (Version 1.0).* Washington, DC: Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/roadmap-change-support-pregnant-and-parenting-students.

APLU (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities). n.d. "How Do College Graduates Benefit Society at Large?" Accessed September 30, 2023. Washington, DC: APLU. https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicuvalues/societal-benefits/.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute, and The Jed Foundation. 2021. *Improving Mental Health of Student Parents: A Framework for Higher Education.* Washington, DC: Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

Camardelle, Alex, and Jennifer Lee. 2019. *A Two-Generation Approach: Solutions to Support Student Parents and Their Children.* Atlanta, GA: Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. https://gbpi.org/a-two-generation-approach/.

Cornett, Allyson. 2023. *Navigating College and Parenthood: Insights from the Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey.* Round Rock, TX: Trellis Strategies. https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/10/Navigating-College-and-Parenting.pdf.

Cruse, Lindsey Reichlin, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Amanda Hare, and Susana Contreras-Mendez. 2021. *Evaluating the Role of Campus Child Care in Student Parent Success.* Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/evaluating-campus-care-in-student-parent-success/.

Cruse, Lindsey Reichlin, Tessa Holtzman, Barbara Gault, David Croom, and Portia Polk. 2019. *Parents In College By the Numbers.* Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/.

Davis, Avery M.D. 2023. "Is Working in College Worth It? How Hours on the Job Affect Postsecondary Outcomes." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis.* Published ahead of print, December 18, 2023. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231210243.

DeMario, Mary Ann. 2021. "Supporting One of Our Most At-Risk Populations: Student-Parents." *Innovation* 16 (10). https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/supporting-one-our-most-risk-populations-student-parents.

Doorley, Nina Besser. 2024. "Despite Its Name, the Pregnant Students' Rights Act is Nothing More Than Another Attack on Abortion Rights." Institute for Women's Policy Research press release, January 18, 2024. https://iwpr.org/despite-its-name-the-pregnant-students-rights-act-is-nothing-more-than-another-attack-on-abortion-rights/.

Doorley, Nina Besser, Salma Elakbawy, and Afet Dundar. 2023. *State Policy for Student Parent Success: A Landscape Scan of Policy Solutions Enacted at the State Level*. IWPR Policy Brief No. C518. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Student-Parent-State-Policy-Brief-FINAL.pdf.

Dubow, Eric F., Paul Boxer, and L. Rowell Huesmann. 2009. "Long-Term Effects of Parents' Education on Children's Educational and Occupational Success: Mediation by Family Interactions, Child Aggression, and Teenage Aspirations." *Merrill Palmer Quarterly* 55 (3). https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/mpq/vol55/iss3/4/.

Dundar, Afet, Lauren A. Tighe, and Jennifer Turner. 2023. *Underwater: Student Mothers and Fathers Struggle to Support Their Families and Pay Off College Loans*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/underwater-student-mothers-and-fathers-struggle-to-support-their-families-and-pay-off-college-loans/.

EdTrust-West. n.d. "Data for the People." Accessed November 15, 2023. https://west.edtrust.org/data-for-the-people/.

Field, Kelly. 2022. "Colleges Brace for More Pregnant and Parenting Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 21, 2022. https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-brace-for-more-pregnant-and-parenting-students.

Frawley, Erin. 2022. "California AB 2881: New Rights for Parenting Students in CA." *The Pregnant Scholar*, November 22, 2022. https://thepregnantscholar.org/california-ab-2881-new-rights-for-parenting-students-in-ca/.

GAO (U.S. Government Accountability Office). 2019. "Higher Education: More Information Could Help Student Parents Access Additional Federal Student Aid." Washington, DC: U.S. GAO. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-522.

Gault, Barbara, Jessica Milli, and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse. 2018. *Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: Costs and Benefits to Individuals, Families, and Society*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/investing-in-single-mothers-higher-education-costs-and-benefits-to-individuals-families-and-society/.

Gault, Barbara, Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, and Rachel Schumacher. 2019. *Bridging Systems for Family Economic Mobility: Postsecondary and Early Education Partnerships*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research. https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/C482_Bridging-Systems-report_5.24.2019_Final.pdf.

Generation Hope. 2023. *On a Journey for Families: Lessons Learned from Colleges Investing in Student Parents*. Washington, DC: Generation Hope. https://www.generationhope.org/on-a-journey-for-families-lessons-learned-2023/.

Goodman, Sandy, Elizabeth Osche, and Meredith Archer Hatch. 2023. *Transforming Data into Action: Fostering College Success for Single Mothers and Parenting Students*. New York: World Education. https://www.collegetransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Transforming-Data-into-Action-Sept-2023.pdf.

Ishimwe, Esther, and Ivy Love. 2023. "Leading the Way: Colleges Championing Access to Housing for Parents." New America's blog, October 5, 2023. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/leading-the-way-colleges-championing-access-to-housing-for-parents/.

Jaschik, Scott. 2021. "FAFSA Completion Falls 4.8%." *Inside Higher Ed*, July 18, 2021. https://www. insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2021/07/19/report-fafsa-completion-fell-48-percent-year-ended- june-30.

Jez, Su Jin. 2023. "A Policy Agenda for California Student Parents." *California Competes*, January 26, 2023. https://californiacompetes.org/resources/a-policy-agenda-for-california-student-parents/.

Karp, Joan, Elizabeth Osche, and Debra Richardson Smith. 2016. *Baccalaureate Student Parent Programs and the Students They Serve*. Beverly, MA: Endicott College Program Evaluation & Research Group.

Mait, Leon. 2023. "To Support Student Parents, Colleges Need to Know Who They Are." New America's blog, October 2, 2023. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/student-parents-data/.

Miller, Kevin. 2023. "What Does Financial Need Look Like for Student Parents?" New America's blog, October 10, 2023. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/what-does-financial-need-look-like- for-student-parents/.

Monaghan, David. 2017. "Does College Enrollment and Bachelor's Completion by Mothers Impact Children's Educational Outcomes?" *Sociology of Education* 90, no. 1 (January): 3–24. https://doi. org/10.1177/0038040716681054.

Montague, Gabriel, Antoinette J. Waller, and Brittani Williams. 2022. "Lack of Access to Child Care Subsidies Is a Barrier to Student-Parent Completion & Success." EdTrust blog, December 19, 2022. https://edtrust. org/resource/lack-of-access-to-child-care-subsidies-is-a-barrier-to-student-parent-completion-success/.

NCES (National Center for Education Statistics). n.d. "Outcome Measures." Accessed August 9, 2024. https:// nces.ed.gov/ipeds/survey-components/11.

Reed, Sherrie, Michel Grosz, Michal Kurlaender, and Susanna Cooper. 2021. "A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges: A New Analysis of Financial Aid Seekers with Dependent Children." UC Davis Wheelhouse Research Brief 6, no. 2 (March). https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf.

Sattelmeyer, Sarah, and Ewaoluwa Obatuase. 2023. "Fighting to Support the Next Generation of Student Parents." New America's blog, September 21, 2023. https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/ edcentral/fighting-to-support-the-next-generation-of-student-parents/.

Short, Caroline Griswold, Reginald M. Grant, Devon Haynes, and Nicole Lynn Lewis. 2022. *Higher Together: The Impact of a College Degree for Young Parents*. Washington, DC: Generation Hope. https://www. generationhope.org/alumni-report-2022.

Sick, Nathan, and Theresa Anderson. 2024. *How Should College Collect Parenting Student Data? (Version 1.0): A Guide to Emerging Best Practices for Policymakers and Practitioners*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/how-should-colleges-collect-parenting-student-data-version.

Sick, Nathan, Theresa Anderson, Autumn R. Green, Afia Adu-Gyamfi, and Mary Ann DeMario. 2023. *Considerations for Postsecondary Data on Student Parenting Status With Recommendations for the Field*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/considerations- postsecondary-data-student-parenting-status.

Texas Legislature Online. 2023. "88(R) HB 1361–Committee Report (Unamended) Version–Bill Analysis." Accessed August 7, 2024. https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/analysis/html/HB01361H.htm.

Urban Institute. n.d. "Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students." Accessed September 30, 2023. https:// www.urban.org/projects/data-action-campaign-parenting-students.

U.S. Department of Education. n.d. "Student's Children or Other Dependents | Federal Student Aid." Accessed November 30, 2023. https://studentaid.gov/2425/help/student-children-dependents.

Williams, Brittani, Jinann Bitar, Portia Polk, Andre Nguyen, Gabriel Montague, Carrie Gillispie, Antoinette Waller, Azeb Tadesse, and Kayla C. Elliott. 2022. *For Student Parents, The Biggest Hurdles to a Higher Education Are Cost and Finding Child Care*. Washington, DC: EdTrust and Generation Hope. https://edtrust.org/resource/for-student-parents-the-biggest-hurdles-to-a-higher-education-are-costs-and-finding-child-care/.

Young Invincibles. 2023. "Texas Signs Bills Critical to Supporting Parenting Students Into Law." Young Invincibles press release, June 21, 2023. https://younginvincibles.org/texas-signs-bills-critical-to-supporting-parenting-students-into-law/.